

## Brainstorming

After reading this handout, you should be able to identify and use techniques that will help you begin writing a paper and continue through the revising process.

### Introduction

Brainstorming can help you choose a topic, develop a new approach, or deepen your understanding of a topic's potential. This article will discuss what brainstorming is, why you might brainstorm, and suggestions for how you might brainstorm. Whether you are starting with too much information or not enough, brainstorming can help you put a new writing task in motion or revive a project that hasn't reached completion. Consider the following scenarios:

- **When you've got nothing:** You might feel "blank" about a certain topic, devoid of inspiration, full of anxiety, or just too tired to craft an outline. Brainstorming can get your inspiration flowing.
- **When you've got too much:** If you have too much chaos in your brain, brainstorming forces the random thoughts onto the page, giving you some concrete words or schemas that you can then arrange according to their logical relations.

### Brainstorming Techniques

Consider these ideas from professional writers, novice writers, people who would rather avoid writing, and people who spend a lot of time brainstorming about...well, how to brainstorm. Some techniques might suit a particular writer, academic discipline, or assignment better than others. If one technique doesn't seem to help you, feel free to try another.

#### Freewriting

When you freewrite, let your thoughts flow. Write down whatever comes to mind. Don't judge the quality of what you write. Don't worry about style or any surface-level issues (I.e., spelling, grammar, or punctuation). If you can't think of what to say, write that down (Really!). The advantage of this technique is that you free up your internal critic and allow yourself to write things you might not write when you feel too self-conscious.

When you freewrite, it may help to set a time limit (15 minutes) or a space limit (Four notebook pages). Write until you reach that goal. It may help to try this technique with your eyes shut or the computer monitor off, which encourages speed and freedom of thought. It's crucial to

keep writing even if you believe you are saying nothing. Your freewriting might even look like this:

“This paper is supposed to be on the politics of tobacco production but even though I went to all the lectures and read the book I can’t think of what to say and I’ve felt this way for four minutes now and I have 11 minutes left and I wonder if I’ll keep thinking nothing during every minute but I’m not sure if it matters that I am babbling and I don’t know what else to say about this topic and it is rainy today and I never noticed the number of cracks in that wall before and those cracks remind me of the walls in my grandfather’s study and he smoked and he farmed and I wonder why he didn’t farm tobacco...”

When you reach your time or space limit, read the text. Yes, there will be a lot of unusable thoughts, but there also will be little discoveries and insights. When you find these gems, highlight them. Cut and paste them into your draft or onto an “ideas” sheet so you can use them in your paper. Even if you don’t find any diamonds in there, you will have either quieted some of the noisy chaos. Now you can face the assigned paper topic.

### **Break down the topic into levels**

Once you have an assignment in front of you, try brainstorming:

- **The general topic**, like “The relationship between tropical fruits and colonial powers”
- **A specific subtopic or required question**, like “How did the availability of multiple tropical fruits influence competition amongst colonial powers trading from the larger Caribbean islands during the 19th century?”
- **A single term or phrase that you’re overusing in the paper**. For example: If you see that you’ve written “increased the competition” about a dozen times in your “tropical fruits” paper, you could brainstorm variations on the phrase itself or on each of the main terms: “increased” and “competition.”

### **Listing/bulleting**

In this technique you jot down lists of words or phrases about a particular topic. Try basing your list on:

- The general topic
- One or more words from your particular thesis/claim
- A word or idea that is the complete opposite of your original word or idea

If your assignment is to write about the changes in inventions over time and your thesis claims that “the 20th century presented a large number of inventions to advance U.S. society by improving upon the status of 19th-century society,” you could brainstorm two different lists to ensure you are covering the topic thoroughly. This way, your thesis will be easy to prove.

The first list might be based on your thesis. Jot down as many 20th-century inventions as you can as long as you know their positive effects on society. The second list might be based on the opposite claim. Jot down inventions that you associate with a decline in that society's quality. Create two lists for 19th-century inventions and then compare all four lists. Using multiple lists will help you gather more perspective on the topic. If your thesis is full of holes, you can alter your claim to one you can prove.

### 3 Perspectives

Multiple perspectives help you see an issue in completely different ways (Imagine being at the base of a mountain versus standing on its peak). To use this strategy, answer the following questions for **each** of the three perspectives. Look for interesting relationships or mismatching ideas.

1. **Describe your subject in detail.** What is your topic? What are its interesting and distinguishing features? Distinguish your subject from those that are similar to it or different from it.
2. **Trace the history of your subject.** How has it changed over time? Why? What significant events influenced your subject?
3. **Map out what's related to your subject.** What is your subject influenced by? How? What does it influence? How? Who has a stake in your topic? Why? What fields do you draw on for the study of your subject? How has your subject been approached by others? How is their work related to yours?

### Cubing

Cubing enables you to consider your topic from six different directions, so cubing will result in six "sides" or approaches to the topic. Take a sheet of paper, consider your topic, and respond to these prompts:

1. **Describe it**
2. **Compare it**
3. **Associate it**
4. **Analyze it**
5. **Apply it**
6. **Argue for and against it**

Look over what you've written. Do any of the responses suggest anything new about your topic? What interactions do you notice among the ideas? Do you see patterns or themes emerging that you could use to approach the topic or draft a thesis? Does one "side" seem particularly helpful to you? Could one side help you draft your thesis statement? This technique should give you a broader awareness of your topic's complexities as well as a sharper focus on what you can do with it.

### Similes

In this technique, complete the following sentence:

\_\_\_\_\_ is/was/are/were like \_\_\_\_\_.

In the first blank put one of the terms or concepts your paper centers on. Try to brainstorm as many answers as possible for the second blank, writing them down as you come up with them.

After you have produced a list of options, read it. What ideas come forward? What patterns or associations do you find?

### **Clustering/mapping/webbing:**

This technique has three (or more) different names, according to how you describe the activity itself or what the end product looks like.

Write a lot of different terms and phrases in a random fashion. Go back to link the words together into a sort of “map” or “web” that forms groups from the separate parts. After the chaos subsides, you will be able to create some order out of it.

To really let yourself go in this brainstorming technique, use a large sheet of paper or tape two pieces together (Use a blackboard if you are working with a group of people). This big space allows all members room to brainstorm at once, so you might have to copy down the results later. If you don't have big paper, don't worry; it works with regular pages, too.

### **How to do it:**

1. **Write your main topic in the center**, using a word or two or three.
2. **Fill in the open space any way you are driven to fill it.** Quickly write down as many related concepts or terms as you can associate with the central topic. Move into a blank space, jot more down, move again, and keep jotting. If you run out of similar concepts, jot down opposites and things that are slightly related. Jot down your grandpa's name; just keep moving and associating. Don't worry about what you write. You can keep or toss out these ideas when the activity is over.
3. **Once you are faced with a multitude of terms and phrases, start to cluster.** Circle related terms, drawing a line to connect the circles. When you run out of terms that are associated, start with another term. Continue this process until you have found all the associated terms. Some of the terms might end up uncircled, but these “loners” can also be useful to you.
  - Use colored pens/pencils/chalk for this part, if you like. If that's not possible, vary the kinds of lines you use to encircle the topics. Use a wavy line, a straight line, a dashed line, a dotted line, a zig-zaggy line, etc.
4. Stand back and survey your work. You should see clusters, a big web, or a map (hence the names for this activity). Now you can start forming conclusions about how to approach your topic. This example illustrates how you might form some logical relationships between the clusters and loners you've decided to keep. At the end of the day, what you do with the particular “map” or “web” that you produce depends on what

you need. What does this map or web tell you to do? Explore an option or two and get your draft going!

### **Relationship between the parts**

For this technique, write the following terms on opposite margins of one sheet of paper:

Whole Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Looking over these pairs, fill in your ideas below each heading. Keep going down through as many levels as you can. Look at the various parts that comprise the parts of your whole concept. What sorts of conclusions can you draw from these patterns, or lack of patterns?

### **Journalistic questions**

In this technique, use the following “big six” questions that journalists rely on to thoroughly research a story:

1. **Who?**
2. **What?**
3. **When?**
4. **Where?**
5. **Why?**
6. **How?**

Write each question down, leaving space between them. Answer these with sentences or phrases that fit your particular topic. Feel free to use into a voice recorder if you’d rather talk out your ideas.

Look over your responses and consider these questions:

- **Do you have more to say** about one or two questions? ‘
- **Are all of your answers pretty well balanced** in depth and content?
- **Was there one question that you couldn’t answer?** Why?
- **How might this awareness help you frame your thesis/claim or organize your paper?**
- **How might this reveal your next step** (such as doing research, giving interviews, or note-taking)?

- If you know a lot more about “where” and “why” something happened than you know about “what” and “when,” **how could this lack of balance direct your research or shape your paper?**
- **How might you organize your paper** so that it emphasizes the known versus the unknown aspects of evidence in the field of study?
- **What else might you do with your results?**

### **Thinking outside the box**

When you are writing within a particular academic discipline, take advantage of your experiences with other departments. For example, if you are writing an English paper, ask yourself how you might approach the topic in another course (I.e., biology, history, philosophy, physics, etc.). How might you see or understand your topic differently? Are there varying definitions for this concept within other departments that help you to think about this term from a new point of view?

For example, if you were discussing “culture” in an English or communications course, you could incorporate the definition of “culture” that is frequently used in the biological sciences. Remember those little Petri dishes from your lab experiments in high school (used to “culture” substances for bacterial growth and analysis)? How might it help you to write your paper if you thought of “culture” as a something that grows, developing in new ways, or flourishing beyond expectations? What if this growth slowed down, altered, or stopped other things altogether?

### **Using charts or shapes**

If you are more visually inclined, you can create charts, graphs, or tables in lieu of word lists as you try to explore an idea. Use the same phrases or words that are central to your topic but try to arrange them spatially (I.e., in a graph, on a grid, or in a table or chart). Seeing different spatial representations might help you understand new relationships among your ideas. If you can’t imagine the shape of a chart at first, put the words on the page. Draw lines between or around them or think of a shape. Do your ideas most easily form a triangle, square, or umbrella? Can you put some ideas in parallel formation? In a line?

### **Purpose and audience**

Thinking about your purpose and audience will lead you to different sets of information, helping you shape material to include (or exclude) in a draft. For this technique, consider these questions:

#### **What is your purpose?**

- What are you trying to do?
- What verbs capture your intent?
- Are you trying to inform? Convince? Describe?

### **Who is your audience?**

- Who are you communicating with?
- What does your audience need to know?
- What do they already know?
- What information does the audience need first, second, third?

### **Dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias**

Visit the library to browse various reference texts (dictionaries, thesauruses, guide books, encyclopedias, etc.) or check online. This technique may seem simple, but it's almost guaranteed that you'll learn several new things.

Try looking up your most important terms. Is there some sort of variety in the definitions? An obscure or archaic definition might help you appreciate how much its meaning has changed over time. Could that realization be built into your paper somehow?

An encyclopedia is sometimes a valuable resource if you need to clarify facts, get a quick background, or get a broader context for an event or item. If you are stuck because you have a vague sense of a seemingly important issue, using this reference may help you move forward with your ideas.

Try searching for your key terms online. University libraries can help you find scholarly articles by providing you with multiple ways that emphasize the various aspects of your key terms.

### **Closing**

Now that you have a list of brainstorming techniques, try writing your first draft or fill in those gaps in your "almost ready" paper.

If you're a fan of outlining, prepare one that incorporates as much of your brainstorming data as seems logical to you. If you're not a fan, write out some larger chunks (large groups of sentences or full paragraphs) to expand upon your smaller clusters and phrases. Keep building from there into larger sections of your paper. You don't have to start at the beginning of the draft. Start writing the section that comes together most easily. You can always go back to write the introduction later.

Once you've begun the paper, try new brainstorming techniques whenever you feel stuck. Keep going until you find the techniques that best suit you and your project.

This article originally appeared as a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.